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THE UTILITY OF BEAUTY

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever," is the rapturous utterance of a very young man. Only too soon do we discover that the "law of diminishing returns" is operative in the realm of the æsthetic and spiritual quite as surely, though more slowly, than in the realm of sensation. As with the drug the dose has to be increased, as in every sensational experience, if protracted, the stimulus has to become more emphatic or subtly penetrant, so we find that for sensitiveness to things spiritual and lovely, the appeal, if protracted or continuous, requires some sort of rebirth of us — the subject, some refreshment, dipping into the fount of youth — if our rapture, our ecstasy, nay, our pleasurable excitement, is to continue increasing or constant.

Relative novelty, then, must always remain an element of importance in our judgments, though we freely admit that the best test of things artistic is nevertheless: can they endure familiarity without a resulting indifference or contempt on our part? It is not that the old things are worse, but that our powers fail us, and that we need variety in the appeal, however willing we may be, to compel some measure of attention. How much more, if we desire to create a profound emotional interest? Coleridge's "Ode to Dejection" is not the morbid record of a merely personal degeneracy. Beauty, while it has undoubtedly its objective follies, if one might so say, is as a psychic experience dependent upon a certain resiliency and superabundance of spirit in us. "Joy is the beauty-making power" and "we in ourselves rejoice." Should we become disappointed with self and this fount of inner delight run dry, we shall, like Coleridge, "see, not feel how beautiful they are": — those clouds piling golden about the setting sun; those seas stretching before us cold to the dawn; those mountains reaching wistfully into the blue; those lovely valleys filled with idyllic hopes and delicious delicate eccentricities of coloring and form; those marvellous prayers in stone, the Gothic cathedrals; those quiet, serene, because self-controlled, perfections of the Greek sculptor; those epics and dramas that have fed the higher soul of our civilization for many centuries.

Now, is there any escape from this dying out in us of that experience which as we grow older we need more and more sorely? The adolescent have their world in them ; they suffice unto themselves. Their eyes are closed save to their own reflections in the universal looking-glass. They do not seem to need God. They do not require the support of art. Only a few temperamentally melancholy, supersensitive, subtly unsocial seem to desire anything besides food and shelter and expenditure of energy, noisy companionship, and a circle of adoring elders. The hunger and thirst for righteousness does not become an ache until we have known sin. The yearning for beauty does not become a compelling passion until we have known ugliness. But right here we get a suggestion, offered us by the mother who lives her life over again in her daughter whom she is introducing to society ; by the father who is making a place in the business world for his son. When we, on our own account, cease to respond to a stimulus, we can indirectly, through sympathy, obtain a reaction thereto in ourself, by imparting to another the experience of the joy we once had ourself. That is why I take my favorite book from the shelf most often when my friend is with me. I know what it contains ; I know it is noble, lovely, exquisite, holy ; I fear to discover that I am dull of sight, hard of hearing, and I leave the book unopened when alone.

So, to use theological language, "faith" leads to "works" because "works" preserve and restore "faith." The very self-preservative instinct of "faith" impels the faithful to "works." It is after all then no altruistic impulse in us which makes us artist, preacher, proselytizer, teacher, special pleader for things divine.

In Browning's "Pauline," the gifted youth who refuses to embody his ideas in definite language because he prefers to admire his shifting day-dream world and adore himself as its creator, will suffer that decline of his image-making power so subtly analyzed by Browning later in the case of Sordello. He who refuses his endeavor to glorify his God by obtaining for him the praise of others, will sooner or later forfeit the bliss of worship which, to save himself from odious comparisons of present with

past and consequent despair, he shall have to secure somehow.

Quite apart from any pride in creation, any ambitious longings for fame or fortune, every sincere lover of beauty sooner or later will find stirring in himself this missionary zeal. Hence, the enduring of poetic birth-pains, of hopes deferred, of remorse at failures, of shame incident to disparagement and misunderstanding, and all for the "cause": an ever fresh revelation to himself, in all her virgin loveliness, of Lady Beauty.

To obtain a definition of art is no easy matter, and the reason perhaps is that every artist sets forth from the particulars of his special art and therefore arrives at a conclusion insufficiently general to satisfy his brethren who worship Lady Beauty according to another rite. When Molière humorously presents us with a picture of that *naïf enfant terrible*, his Bourgeois, crying out, "And when I say 'fetch my slippers,' is that prose? Have I been talking prose all my life without knowing it?" it is of course the pedantic rhetorician who is coming in for good-natured criticism quite as much as the Bourgeois. Prose, if we mean by it an art-form, is not stumbled into by most of us. To be natural is not always to be gracious, noble, or even interesting. The masters of prose are fewer in number than the masters of verse. Just because the rules of the technique of prose-expression are more unseizable and manifold, because the range is greater and the shadings more delicate, it would be less likely for a man to stumble into prose than into verse. Language having its daily, hourly utilities as a medium of haphazard human intercourse is one thing, and quite another thing is language seized upon by the holy spirit of man for the ennoblement of things expressed, for the enlargement of hearer and reader, to the vanishing of horizon limits, to the intensive realization of the life of the body and the soul. It is so with all other materials, not merely with language. But perhaps no art suffers as much as literary art by the confusion of terms. Cyclopædias are not literature. Newspaper writing very rarely makes even an effort to be literature. Most of the fiction devoured by the readers who have learned the three R's, but never served their apprenticeship, never applied for a novitiate, are mere panderings, mere pretenses—utilities that hardly rank with cabbage leaf tobacco,

cereal coffee, but—surely they are in no sense “art.” For as not all verbal expression is art,—prose or verse,—so not all drawing, all sculpting, all thrumming and strumming is art. Expression to be sure it is; but only expression that arrests attention, conveys intention, and produces distention can rightly be considered art. It is only such expression as impresses with the worth of what is expressed by the manner of the expression, that deserves the name; and to be true art, the impression of worth must be in due proportion to the presumed importance of what is expressed.

The question of course may be raised, “Why art at all?” to which we should answer, “Why expression at all of any sort?” “Speech is silver and silence is golden.” Why not then the golden standard forever and aye, “Aum and ecstasy”? We should be disposed to reply: Because “Aum and ecstasy” are reasonably possible only to the cross-legged Yogi with milleniums of rice diet. To us carnivorous folk who do and die, who are essentially active and not contemplative, to whom rest is incident to work, for whom the night is the interval between day and day, what we need is not “Aum and ecstasy,” golden silence, but noble and ennobling speech. If we are racially compelled to utterance, if we can never say die while alive, and if living to us means doing, then art becomes a temperamental religious necessity, a *sine qua non* of exaltation and ideal apotheosis for the men of our European and American stocks.

The highest intelligent man of our race may not be blessed like William Blake with fourfold vision; Beulah may for him be a promised land; a much more so than that realm unpromised where one beholds the unseen, the unthinkable. But to him at least is granted twofold vision always: things-as-they-are, and things-as-they-might-be and are not; as they are not though they were such perhaps, and are to be such again some time. He may endeavour to give his ideal world a home in the mystic past: some golden age of innocency, some Eden life unfallen, some time when the Gods walked with man. Or, like the modern evolutionist, he may project his ideal world forward into the ages to come. In either case the contrast remains: the world-as-it-is, the world-as-it-can-be-thought.

To the world-as-it-is the practical man is closely related. In the world-as-it-might-be the man of the spirit claims his citizenship. Now things-as-they-are compel us to see them, and things-as-they-were-or-are-to-be must seem therefore relatively unreal. The soul makes its hunger felt, when the spirit will starve without a murmur. We live in the present and we can not afford to be absent-minded or absent-hearted. If however the present be sordid, base, ignoble, mean, shall not we ourselves be assimilated to it and become sordid, base, ignoble, mean? The seer in the sty? The poet in the garret? Young love in a cottage? True, and when we are seers, all anointed inevitably, when we are poets of unfailing aspiration and inspiration, when we are immortal lovers having bathed in Morris's Well at the World's End; then can we safely inhabit cottage, attic, or sty. When, in other words, we have the child's power of touching our environment with the fairy-wand and making the garbage-barrel in the back yard become a pile of multi-colored precious things strewn with diamonds; then it may be safe for us. When pumpkin will do for carriage, and rats for coachmen, we do not need art because we have not the twofold vision. We do not see things-as-they-are, we only see things-as-they-might be. But then on the other hand our social value to the world is well nigh lost. We are hermits, harmless ego-maniacs or children grown up, that most awful thing—the little babe by increase of dimension become the simpering idiot. We *must* live in the world of things-as-they-are and we must take cognizance of the relations of things in that world; for if ever the world of things-as-they-are is to realize in part our vision of things-as-they-might-be, it will not be through hocus pocus, self-deception, not through Eddyite denials of the obvious; but through honest recognition of facts and courageous affirmations in long protracted toil that will result in bringing our two worlds at least to partial reconciliation, and the soul to some degree of merited peace. For so long as these worlds are wholly apart and hostile we ourselves must suffer a species of dychotomy. To say the least, our amphibious life becomes distressing, and we tend to ignore or deny that world which will best brook ignoring or denial. We will drift with the current only, instead of out-

speeding it by oar or sail. It is to save us from thus being helplessly drifted with the current that art is summoned to our aid.

We may arrive then at some notion of what art is by clearly recognizing its human service. To make us see things-as-they-are-not with some measure of distinctness and make us believe in that vision it has granted us; to make us discern intellectual realities as vividly as we are often compelled to suffer the grosser realities of sense; this is the function of art. Not that every ideal is better than the actual. There may be ideals infinitely worse than the actual. Only the ideal, that which-ought-(as we say)-to be, is among the things that are not; and in order really to discern the worth of that particular possibility we must appeal to sense and emotion. If it be found worthy, we may then anticipate development and contribute therefore "to the shortening of the times." If it be found unworthy, we shall have, by our own imaginative experience of it, quenched to the soul's profit, forever perchance, a false and vicious hope.

Progress is at the risk of degeneracy, and the visions of things ideal, the art prophetic and poetic, may serve Ahriman as well as Ormuzd. This proviso we frankly make, and proceed to restate what we deem to be the office of art: to create an appearance that can compete with actuality, not by delusion causing a hallucinatory error, but by illusion; an association, that is to say, with what is real, establishing some arbitrary point of contact between the sense-world and the world of ideas, a form forced upon stone, a meaning injected into words, an incantation made into sounds competent to call up some specific emotion. And all this that we may see things-as-they-are-not, knowing that they are not actually, but are in a deeper sense for us already real, real as tree in acorn, real as rose in slip, and that they may and must indeed come to be actual for us or in us, or for and in our offspring, the men that yet shall be.

Let us revert again to what we mean by idealization. We have heard so much of realism and naturalism that we suppose to idealize is to be wilfully fantastic, absurd, maudlin, to reveal a childish or senile incompetency of some sort. The fact is that the extremest theoretical realist or naturalist never for one

instant in his practice expects to take the world haphazard as he finds it. When my artist friend says that everything "has an interesting aspect" and that therefore one need have no care for selection of subjects for art, he tucks away into his word "aspect" that process of selection so essential to art, and which he is unaware of because it is instinctive. Even the photographer must "compose." He must not only dispose his matter with reference to his point of view, but he must relate the parts of his subject with reference to a united significant effect; he must in other words extricate the essential from the insignificant details. If our artist works in terms of time rather than of space, as epic, or dramatic poet, he must show a consciousness of the cause in the effect; insinuate what is possible in the mere appearance of what is; make the latent, patent, so to say; the genetic, vital; and the meaning, inherent. He must emphasize and individualize; seize and eternalize the moment or sequence of moments in the progress of events; isolate aspects of things; in a word, anticipate evolution.

And all this the artist does; not of a set purpose, perhaps, but most persistently because he desires that their presentation, interpretation, or creation shall give us joy; that we shall feel a passion for it, a fear and awe of it, a tender devotion to it. And this he cannot accomplish except by economizing our energy, directing us aright, saving us from the haphazards and bad luck, by the best road, or the well-defined grassy pathway; leaving us free only where we are safe, giving us just enough to do that we may share his joy of creation, and imagine that it is we who have discovered the meaning, that by us the value has been assigned to the vision, and that of us it obtains its symbolic worth, its sacramental halo.

Is there, however, no need of ethical criticism? Shall the artist make us hells as well as heavens? Shall he create for us the Witch of Hörsel as well as the Venus Urania? It is only he who has not been fully initiated into the mysteries of art who fears for us the results of æsthetic freedom. Only what appeals to us in our highest, that does not incur the condemnation of our noblest, will long maintain itself. The abominations of the fashion plate are misbegotten and born amiss into the world by

the Trade-spirit ; and the unholy monster straightway devours his own offspring. It is so of every other abomination or mere virtuosity that is meaningless or abhorrent to the noble in man. False ideals, degrading experiences, may be bravely set forth in art ; and though they may not be for all men, yet their very artistic treatment will serve to disinfect and neutralize their poison. Surely the "City of Dreadful Night" will minister to a mind diseased the æsthetic antidote, rather than encourage melancholia. The "Laus Veneris" may have been abused ; but it has corrupted as yet probably no man or woman. The "Fleurs du Mal" whatever may be said against them in so far as they are art, have done the world no harm. Whereas, to decree ethically what shall or shall not be endeavored by the artist, would mean the death of the art spirit. Every great prophet has been called dangerous and immoral and subversive of order by his contemporaries. Every great moral innovator must make experiments perhaps in his own person. If he is to discover new truth he must set aside all pre-judgments however right they may be, repeal all laws however prudent, to ascertain afresh for himself and us what the veritable facts may be. So St. Paul assures us that insomuch as sin abounded, so much the more did grace abound. And Shelley, Byron and Goethe, and Heine, not assuredly unimpeachable in their private lives, have served to advance in definiteness the moral ideal of the race ; the error and weakness of the artist has served as truly (nay more so perhaps) as his success, or virtue. The Bible has its obscene passages. Shakespeare might be wrested to a soul's destruction. Men have committed suicide after reading the "Sorrows of Werther," — but so did the swine choke in the sea of Gennesareth !

Without freedom of the artist, no art ; and without art, if you include in the term all those means to set before us the world-as-it-is-not-but-as-it-might-be, we are mere animals living to individual and associate animal ends. To be endowed with the power to compare, invent, and discover, to have all our activities leading to definitions of truth and good, and these being deprived of all real actualization here and now, in so far as they are felt to be the substance of our human life, — such a condition

must cause that bitter despondency, that awful despair to supervene, which will throw us back upon our merely animal selves. What is truth? Where is good? Have these no reality save in idea? Are they malign ghosts haunting our sensual feast? So we doubt and disbelieve and suffer until art says yea to our hopes, and the ideal is real; and we are bid behold and worship. So art saves our faith in God, because it saves our faith in man as man.

The province then of art, we repeat, is to render sensible what we would have so. The Zeus? The Apollo? Behold *the* Man. But the Laokoön? Ay? And Œdipus, Job, and Lear? The painful and the criminal even are by deeper understanding of life to be redeemed for us. We are to be carried in the chariot of fire unto the farther side of disillusion, beyond despondency. But the Satyr? The Pan? Here also art has the same office. Aristophanes, Molière, and George Meredith, — what do they endeavour to do but save us from our cynicism, from criticism reacting acidly upon our self? Is the world not good enough for us? Is there failure, inconsistency, absurdity? So much the better. The exception proves the rule. This perverse and absurd world could not maintain itself here at all, but that it is founded on the unshakable, and surrounded of the serene. If our intellect is confounded, it is but that we may be compelled to live with the Gods and behold all things very good from the superhuman point of view. So in the true presentation of the ideal, in the redemption of the hideous and grotesque, in the reinterpretation of the perverse and contemptible working idyllically, tragically, comically, humourously or satirically, art is always performing the same holy office: making us realize the world vision in and through the world of sense.

But the practical man, the man who has spent perhaps the best years of his life in the midst of things-as-they-are, refuses altogether to recognize consciously and pay his devotions to the world of things-as-they-might-be. He will not read poetry except for information. Literature and sculpture and painting must for him immortalize incidents and events, subtly present him with usable psychology, be the weather prophet unto his shifty climate. He must have his little moral Q. E. D. tacked

to the fable, or fancy that he gets a magic spell to improve his luck. If song and dance and procession are allowed, it is not for their loveliness but for their vanities and lubricity, their advertising value in pomp and show. He must have shelter that will make known his bank balance. He would have comfort, amusement, distraction, excitement for the miserable little leisure that his business leaves. If art will do these things he will accept of art. He recognizes the necessity of decorating the banquet hall, publishing his patriotism with bunting, receiving the president with illuminations and the diamond-studded shirt-bosom, because these things keep up faith in an era of prosperity! So your practical man always and always insists upon an immediate utilitarian service, if he is to invest even stolen goods in art. And the artist is apt to speak harshly of the practical man, consider him an out and out savage, deserving only to be electrocuted—when artists shall control the government!

Fortunately for us the republic of Plato is not likely to be set up for a while. The poets will not be banished the land, neither will the philosophers make or administer the laws. The practical man whatever his shortcomings, by his very contact with the world of things-as-they-are is trained to demand of art that one thing without which art cannot maintain itself true for any length of time. It is altogether too easy for the artist to build a Chinese wall about himself,—coteries, cliques, mutual admiration societies,—and circumscribe the realm of his goddess, Beauty, and render her worship impotent for social good. The practical man says, show me the use of art, bring the world of things-as-they-might-be into specific and immediate touch with the world of things-as-they-are, at one point surely, at every point if possible. Now, whatever we think of him, we shall have to recognize the plain fact that the practical man will urge these demands. We must conciliate the selfish nature in him avoiding thus its hostilities which would neutralize for him all the spiritual efficacy of art; we must preoccupy the conscious mind of him whom we would cause to worship, so as to contract its circle of vigilance, distract it from the scrutiny of what it cannot comprehend, and so effectively reach it as an irresistible suggestion through the deeper inner man. “Here is the useful, prac-

tical friend. I recommend art to you only as useful!" And before he knows, the practical man finds his faith reviving, his will fortified, his love fanned to a blaze, and all these things seem to be a discovery of his own, an inspiration of his own, coming as they do to him out of himself. This is good psychology. If art desires to convince, it must first then understand that for every man the most truly delightful is likely to be in his present untutored state part of what is to him uninteresting, tiresome, provoking, or positively repulsive. If we are to wheedle our prospective convert out of his prejudices, we shall do so best by that highest art, a total concealment of art, that art which we are not always conscious of as admirers and adorers, because the producers thereof had themselves ceased to be conscious of as producers, it being the product of long devoted habit, study, resolute addiction, blessed occurrences and inspirations. When art becomes deliberately and self magnifyingly didactic; when art talks of its "mission" and "message" overmuch, and struts about fantastically, crowns itself with laurel, and deports itself unseemly, art is in eminent danger of perishing. So the demands of the practical man are but reinforcements of the highest demands of the poetic spirit in man. The practical man demands selflessness in poet and seer. That is his guarantee of the effective working in and through him of that higher self, that racial consciousness, *Zeit-geist*, muses, Holy Spirit,—call it what you please. Without it true art has never come to being and power in the recorded past.

It is for these reasons that the Arts and Crafts movement is to be held as salutary in spite of temporary aberrations, and the inevitable occasional exploitations of the general programme. William Morris was more of a prophet as craftsman and salesman, than on the socialist platform. I want a chair for comfort. It shall serve my body first. My body only? Shall it serve me as it could serve an ape? "No," says the chair. "See when you are at leisure to see: I am rightly honestly built, graceful and strong. I am honest; I am generous. I am for thee then not only as ape but as normal man. If thou hast time and will to consider, he who made me was not a slave, a machine. He was as thou, my owner, or he could never have understood thy

wants and made me for thee. When thou art with me thou art also with the spirit of a friend and brother, and when thou hast leisure let me further whisper into thine ear: I am not only for thee as thou art, but for thee as thou mightest be. Before thee were *men*, else were not I such; and after thee I am ready for thy children's children. My maker has anticipated their consciousness; what is dim in thee, and what thou therefore canst not see but dimly in me, shall be bright in them, and shall for them shine out brightly from me. I see the immortality of thy race, the immortality of the individual spirit if there be further evolution for thee after death. I am of the noble past. I am for the nobler future." So it is that the beautiful chair becomes a prophet unto the weary and despondent worker, a cheerer, a comforter, a friend of the spirit. So it is that art takes our inner life and compels it to its higher possibilities, nay, rather impels and persuades, establishes the dominion of the fortunate moment, perennializes the instant of surest and sanest vision.

Thou hast been on the mount and hast beheld the ordinarily unseen? Very well. Descend into the valley. Yet ere thou goest down, take with thee this shining stone, this flower, as tokens that thou hast been here communing with God. Thou sayest "Why, am I not full of the vision?" True, thou art now full of the vision, but at the foot of the mount is the demoniac boy, and the multitudes of little faith. Take down with thee a tale, a sketch, a song, a dance, a little daub, a foolish modeling, the plan of a structure; nay, not only to testify that thou hast seen, but to give unto others the desire to climb the mount whence thou sawest what thou canst but ill report!

To the present writer at all events it seems clear that without public glory there could not long be patriotism or civic pride; that order and self subordination cannot long be without a sense of worth in the whole of which we may be but an insignificant part; and that this sense of worth in the whole which we must serve, needs must be set forth for us in monument and building, in music and poetry and pageant; must be made to appeal to eye and ear and touch, if it is to conquer the rebellious lusts of the individual and make him a joyous servant of society. Not that art will suffice to do all this, but all this cannot be done at all

without art. How shall the masses maintain their faith in God without psalms, and temples, and eloquence of story and parable, and harp and organ, and voice; without procession and dance, spectacle and drama? Without art, faith in God, which is but higher faith in man, has never long maintained itself. Hence the sublime social, political, moral, religious utility of art to the civilized man of our practical American society. And what needs to be done to obtain the loyal and generous obedience of our men of affairs as also of our leaders of the people to the behests of art? Convince them of the utility of beauty. Assure them that beauty is not ashamed to be useful, to reach modestly and indirectly,—proud rather that she can never be true to herself without subserving the humblest as well as the loftiest uses of man.

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